

TT No.147: Andrew Gallon - Sat 15th December 2007; **Quorn** v Nantwich Town; UniBond League Division 1 South; Res: 1-4; Att: 127; Admission: £6; Programme: £1.50 (32pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

I've always had a soft spot for the Northern Premier League. The very first non-league action I watched was in this competition. As a university student in Liverpool in the early 1980s, curiosity drew me and my football-following mates to Anfield, Goodison and Prenton Park - and eventually to Holly Park. What used to be the home of South Liverpool before the club lost its battle with Allerton's vandals was just down the road and, having gone once, we became pretty regular attenders. Lawrence Iro and Joe Rice were our heroes. After spending my schooldays watching a (mostly) Fourth Division club, I was accustomed to a sleeves-rolled-up approach to the 'Beautiful Game' and also to a mere scattering of spectators. But South in particular, and the Northern Prem in general, opened a new window on the world. This seemed, at the time, the ultimate in raw meat, red-blooded football. Work over the intervening years acquainted me with the Northern League and led to a revision of that

opinion. By comparison, the dear old NPL was as cultured as Italy's Serie A. But I digress.

As the name suggests, and the opposition we saw at Holly Park confirmed, the NPL is a Northern league for Northern clubs. I'm struggling to get my head round the concept this season of a South section in the NPL. To me, Shepshed, Spalding, Gresley, Belper and today's destination Quorn are not Northern towns. By all means, let's have a proper set-up at this level in the pyramid for Midland clubs. Nothing against it. But, please, let's keep the NPL up North. There wasn't much red meat about Quorn's appropriately named team. More vegetarian than carnivore. Pretty football, nice patterns, but no physical presence and scarcely any end product in front of goal. Nantwich, who know a thing or two about what it takes to win games, were more pragmatic. Sure, the Dabbers could play a bit, but they weren't averse to being direct and straightforward. Good Northern attributes. Ones Quorn were unable to counter.

It took just 22 seconds for the visitors to go ahead. Ashley Carter was picked out unmarked at the back post and side-footed a volley across Lee Wilson and into the bottom corner before the old chap next to me could finish unwrapping his first toffee of the contest. It was the start of a nightmarish afternoon for the freshfaced Quorn keeper. Wilson watched helplessly as a 20-yard drive from Hungarian Gyorgy Kiss crashed back off the underside of his crossbar before seasonally gifting Nantwich their second when fumbling a harmless Carter (26) header into the net. Team-mate Gary Griffiths (27) was so angry at his colleague's inexplicable lapse he stabbed one back from close range within a minute. Sam Carter and Paul White then missed sitters for the hosts and were punished when Andy Kinsey (41) made it 3-1 - with Wilson again badly at fault. He was less than

committed diving at the feet of the Dabbers striker and Kinsey was able to run the ball through him and then tap into an empty net. Moments later, the unhappy Wilson sliced a clearance straight to Pavol Suhaj and the big Nantwich striker was inches wide with an instant snapshot. The lumbering Suhaj, a Slovakian in the Dabbers' League of Nations line-up, was a real threat. His one-dimensional presence reminded me of BBC radio commentator Pat Murphy's celebrated description of Tony Cascarino: Like Douglas Bader - brilliant in the air, but a little awkward on the ground.

Far less goalmouth action in the second half, which at least gave frozen fans the opportunity to admire a magnificent sunset. Wilson redeemed himself slightly by denying Suhaj in a one-on-one and the eastern European later cracked a direct free-kick from 20 yards against the Quorn keeper's crossbar. The hosts took until the 87th minute to have a second decent effort at goal, White's back-post header bringing a diving save out of the hitherto redundant Lee Jones. But Nantwich had the final say in stoppage time. Kinsey's through ball beat the offside trap and substitute Adam Beasley raced away to slide an angled shot past the luckless Wilson. Furious Quorn protests at the linesman, whose flag had stayed resolutely by his knees, went unrewarded.

Quorn may be lacking in Northern credentials but their Sutton Park ground, opened in 1994, is an almost spotless enclosure. Pride of place belongs to the pitch which, today of all days when the wintry weather has put paid to countless matches, is in perfect condition. The venue is about half a mile from a pleasant village steeped in the hunting tradition. A neat brick turnstile block leads to a large tarmac car park and open hardstanding behind the near goal. To the rear is a line of conifers and the Farley Way road. To the left is an artificial floodlit five-a-side pitch much used by the community. Over to the right is the sole stand. This is a long, low structure, with 350 red plastic tip-up seats spread over three rows and sheltered by a deeply overhanging roof in green metal sheeting. Behind is a narrow 'pitch' used for training and pre-match warm-ups, and beyond that the noisy A6 bypass. If you look carefully, you can make out the floodlights of Leicestershire Senior League club Barrow Town's Riverside Park ground on the far side of the dual carriageway. Opposite the stand is a single-storey brick building which contains the club house, directors' hospitality area and dressing rooms. A central gable adds a bit of style. Missing and wonky lettering on the Quorn Football Club sign does not. The club house is pleasant, and its walls are covered with interesting team and action photographs dating from the 1940s. A nice touch. Refreshments are available here, along with half-time updates courtesy of omnipresent Sky Sports. So cold is the afternoon, some people are showing early signs of hypothermia as they clutch steaming mugs of tea. The team line-ups are pinned to the window of the directors' room, though the PA system is first-class. Flat areas of tarmac flank the social club behind which is a tumbledown collection of sheds and glasshouses belonging to local businesses. The bottom end, also fringed with conifers, is open hardstanding, which gives way to a broad strip of threadbare grass. A post and rail fence, painted red and white, surrounds the pitch. The floodlights, four per side,

are mounted on low, broad pylons with three large lamps on each. One of the pylons doubles as a mobile phone mast.

This was not, I have to say, my first-choice game but having finished work as late as 1pm in the even more frozen North, I was simply relieved to find one still going ahead. In the end, it boiled (if that's the right verb to use on such a chilly day) down to a choice of two. As new grounds go, Quorn's isn't at all bad and the quality of the pitch lends itself to decent football. I can't, I'm afraid, say much complimentary about the club's programme. The bright cover apart, it's a dismal offering and poor value for the cover price. Much consists of the UniBond League's weekly newsletter, there isn't any sort of editorial updating fans on recent events at Quorn and even the space for Nantwich's team on the line-ups page is blank. But I don't suppose the regulars are too bothered. Events on the pitch count most, and with three promotions in the last 11 years, Quorn are a club heading in the right direction.

06/20